Pathways to better funding for women-led organisations

Nicholas Veerapen, Caterina Mazzilli and Megan Daigle

February 2026

HPG Humanitarian Policy Group

ODI Global

How to cite: Veerapen, N., Mazzilli, C. and Daigle, M. (2026) *Pathways to better funding for women-led organisations.* HPG report. London: ODI Global (www.odi.org/en/publications/pathways-to-better-funding-for-women-led-organisations).

This PDF has been prepared in accordance with good practice on accessibility.

Graphic: Jessica Rennoldson/HPG

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Holly Miller, Ene Ejato, Anu Pillay and Maliha Fairooz (Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN)) and Elise Baudot (ICVA) for their thought partnership throughout the process of producing this paper, as well as to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) for hosting our roundtable in October 2025. Our thanks also go to Irene Dawa (Community Empowerment for Peace and Development (CEPAD)), Anila Noor (New Women Connectors), Gloria Soma (Titi Foundation), Batoul Aleita (Women Now for Development), Oksana Kuiantseva (East SOS), Delphine Pinault (CARE International), Niki Ignatiou (ActionAid), Gloria Doñate (Irene M. Staehelin Foundation), Helena Sandesjö (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)), Melinda Wells (Equality Fund), Sophie Giscard d'Estaing (Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF)), Atalanti Moquette (Giving Women) and Anna Tazita Samuel (Women for Change). Generous peer reviews were provided by Helen Lindley-Jones (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)), Olivia Goldin (FCDO), Barbara Lecq (FCDO), April Pham (the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA)), Holly Miller (FHN), Irene Dawa (CEPAD), Sophie Giscard d'Estaing (WPHF), Sinéad Walsh (ODI Global) and Kate Oliver (Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)). We also thank Marika de Faramond and Aimee Long for adept facilitation of the project as a whole, and Sara Hussain and Jessica Rennoldson for supporting the production of this paper.

About this report

This report and associated research were enabled by support from the UK FCDO's Humanitarian Diplomacy Fund.

About the authors

ORCID numbers are given where available. Please click on the ID icon next to an author's name in order to access their ORCID listing.

Nicholas Veerapen[ID] is Communications and Events Officer with HPG at ODI Global.

Dr Caterina Mazzilli[ID] is Research Officer in HPG.

Dr Megan Daigle[ID] is Senior Research Fellow in HPG.

Contents

Acronyms

CAFOD	Catholic Agency for Overseas Development
CEPAD	Community Empowerment for Peace and Development
FRF	First Response Fund
GBV	gender-based violence
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IMS	Irene M. Staehelin (Foundation)
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
UHF	Ukraine Humanitarian Fund
UN	United Nations
WLO	women-led organisation
WRO	women's rights organisation
WPHF	Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund

1 Why women-led organisations – and why now?

Women-led organisations (WLOs) are indispensable humanitarian actors whose proximity, trust and gendered analysis enable them to reach people and achieve priorities that international and non-gender-focused actors simply cannot. There is also a fast-growing body of evidence showing that WLOs are efficient and impactful humanitarian responders, especially when they are able to ensure that humanitarian action navigates social power dynamics and does no harm. For example, in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programming, accessing care through organisations with an explicit rights lens is an affirming enabler of care, helping to overcome low uptake of existing services (Daigle et al., 2023). Similarly, survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) are more likely to report incidents (and to do so sooner) if they can speak to someone they trust, such as a local WLO – that is, women who are known to them and who are part of their community (Guimond and Robinette, 2014; Maung et al., 2025). During the Covid-19 pandemic, WLOs' embeddedness in communities was key to reaching those at risk of social exclusion, like people with disabilities, and disseminating public health messages, for example in Kenya and South Sudan (Njeri and Daigle, 2022; see also Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2021).

What is a WLO?

The term 'WLO' is often used interchangeably with 'women's rights organisation' (WRO) and 'feminist organisation', although there are important differences.

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) offers the following definition:

> An organization with a humanitarian mandate and/or mission that is (1) governed or directed by women; or (2) whose leadership is principally made up of women, demonstrated by 50 per cent or more occupying senior leadership positions. (IASC, 2024: 2)

WLOs are diverse, ranging from smaller, grassroots organisations to more established national and regional entities. They also work on many aspects of crisis response, including but certainly not limited to 'gender' concerns like GBV and SRHR.

Research also shows that responses rooted in local communities, national contexts and civil society are efficient and effective (Share Trust and Warande Advisory Centre, 2022; Maung et al., 2025). While WLOs share many strengths with other local and national actors – cultural competency, language, proximity, access, long-standing presence – they also have particular strengths rooted in their

leadership as women, girls and gender-diverse people who face marginalisation around the world (see Shake the Table and The Bridgespan Group, 2022). Some of the strengths that emerged through our research are:

- unparalleled access, not just to hard-to-reach geographies but hard-to-reach groups, which are often invisible to outsiders;
- monitoring of and response to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment committed by a variety of actors, including international humanitarian actors;
- prevention, including of conflict and GBV;
- an intersectional approach that begins organically from the stated needs and priorities of communities, rather than the predetermined approaches of international actors;
- trust from their communities, including relating to sensitive concerns like GBV.

But, despite years of advocacy by WLOs themselves, the current humanitarian funding landscape is littered with barriers to their full participation. Many of these barriers – scarcity and low quality of funding, onerous accountability requirements, misconceptions around capacity and risk – are relevant to all local and national actors, but they affect WLOs disproportionately. This can be traced to WLOs' tendency to be smaller, their focus on marginalised people and issues, and the gendered discrimination they face in the humanitarian sphere (Maung et al., 2025).

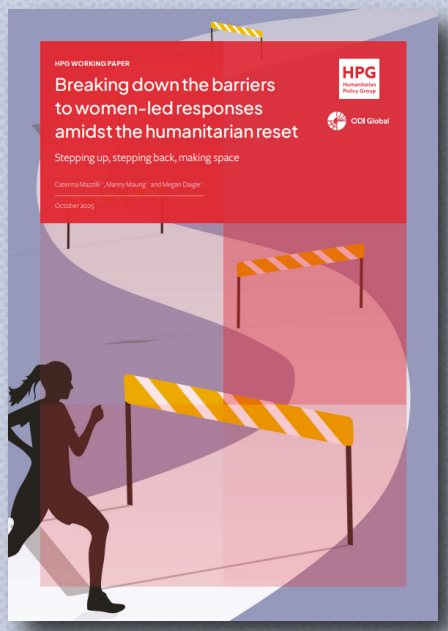
The reasons for change go far beyond budget cuts: the old ways of funding and collaborating were simply not working – for WLOs, funders or affected communities. In the context of the humanitarian reset, it is more important than ever that funders move resources quickly to where they are needed and best able to achieve cost-effective responses. Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher has explicitly called for an 'increase in funding to women-led organizations' (Fletcher, 2025), alongside other commitments to cooperation, community-led approaches and complementarity. To translate these into action, deliberate and bold efforts are needed from all funders. Now is the time to co-create solutions with WLOs for a more inclusive, coordinated and accessible funding ecosystem.

Our objective here is to provide insights and recommendations to help achieve a pluralistic, symbiotic and mutually beneficial ecosystem of humanitarian funding. Not unlike the humanitarian reset, meaningful change for WLOs must be at the same time both incremental and transformational, recognising the complex pressures, constraints and incentive structures facing all actors in this space. Our goal is not to centre any one funding modality or mechanism, but rather to provide concrete pathways towards a more inclusive, accessible and efficient funding ecosystem that works for the diversity of WLOs and funders working on humanitarian response – and ultimately for crisis-affected people.

The evidence base for WLOs' impact

This paper is based on new research examining the effectiveness and impact of WLOs as crisis responders as well as the funding challenges they face, which has been published in the two papers below. This new body of evidence draws from a desk review of available evaluations, case studies and published research (Maung et al., 2025) as well as interviews with a range of stakeholders and a mixed-methods survey completed by 271 representatives of WLOs from around the world (Mazzilli et al., 2025).

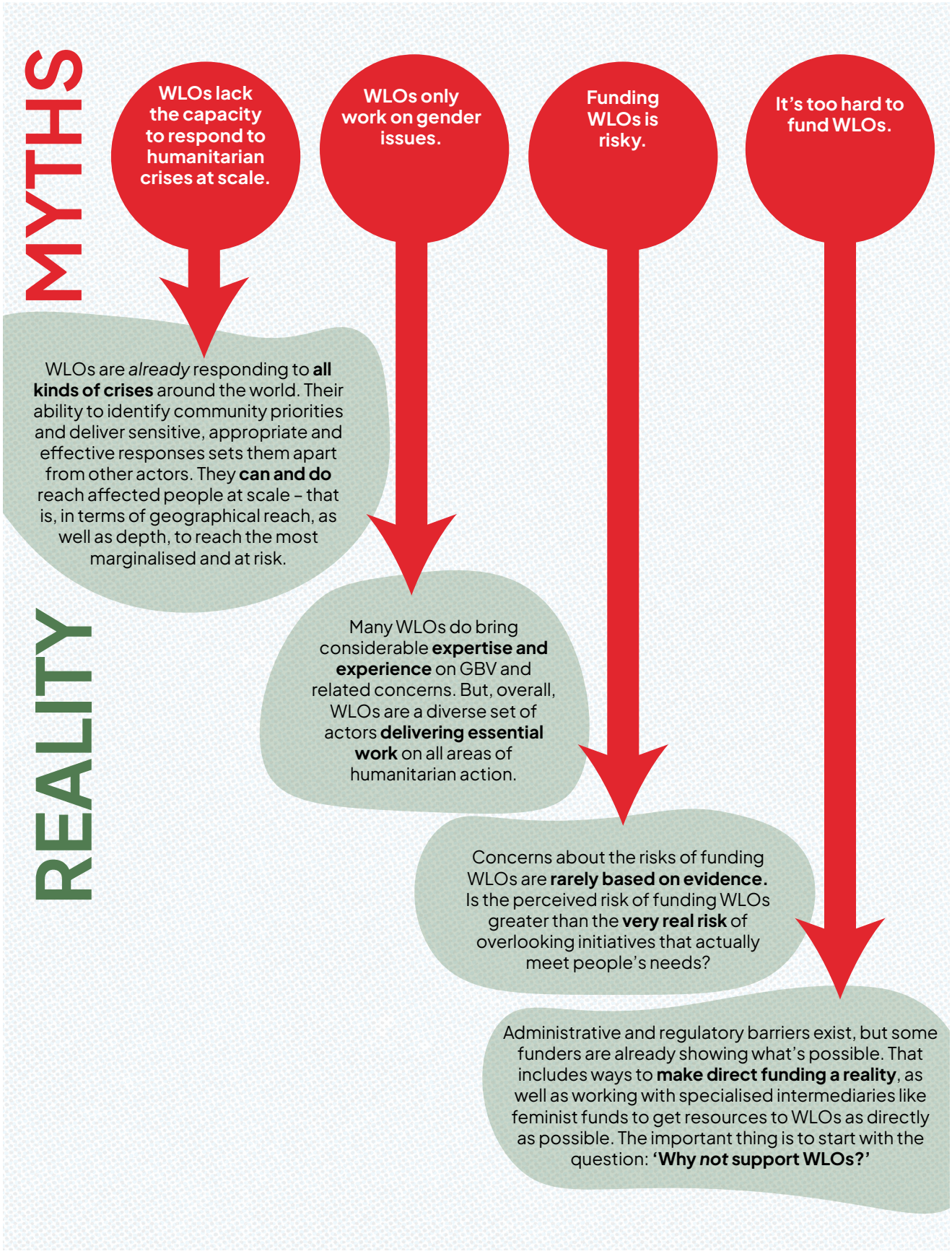
Evidence synthesis



Discussion paper

See ODI Global's website to read the evidence synthesis and discussion paper in full.

Debunking myths about funding WLOs



2 Building on success

This chapter offers a range of promising examples, representing various modalities and types of funders, that can be scaled up and replicated by others seeking to improve the overall funding landscape for WLOs. The examples we showcase here are largely the result of the leadership and advocacy of WLOs themselves, which have been critical to facilitating change.

Rather than supporting any specific model, we highlight what can be learned from each example, as well as how – with continued improvement and engagement – each modality can become more inclusive, accessible and mutually beneficial for all stakeholders. Some modalities might be more suitable than others for certain contexts, donors and recipient organisations. In general, our aim is to draw attention to the process by which each funding modality is developed, more than just the funding type or outcome.

Moreover, in the context of considerable resource constraints and rising needs in crisis settings, and amidst calls for greater efficiency, it is important to consider what overall balance of mechanisms works across the sector to ultimately achieve more and better results for crisis-affected populations.

2.1 Direct funding models

Direct funding refers to funding given straight to grantees without passing through an intermediary. In the international humanitarian sector, this refers primarily to funding allocated by government donors' humanitarian budgets, but it can also refer to funds from philanthropic foundations or private-sector entities. Direct funding can be administered in different ways: some funders prefer to manage direct grants from their headquarters, while others do so through their embassies located in the same or neighbouring countries as the grantee.

Funding directly is often seen as bureaucratically onerous, both for donors – due to programme management requirements – and for smaller organisations like some WLOs, due to stringent reporting requirements (Mazzilli et al., 2025). The bureaucratic burden often discourages donors from funding directly. In an interview, one government donor explained that because most WLOs can absorb only small funding amounts relative to donors' overall humanitarian budgets, financing them directly would require numerous contracts and due diligence procedures with different WLOs, making it far more burdensome than working with a few established intermediaries. Donors also frequently report beliefs and assumptions that WLOs lack the capacity to respond to crises effectively or to conform to humanitarian principles, or that working with them raises risks of funding misuse or corruption, but these assumptions are rarely based on evidence (Maung et al., 2025).

Promising examples demonstrate that some of the perceived barriers to direct funding are surmountable, and that there are important advantages that come with directly funding local organisations like WLOs. For example, WLOs report that having direct access to funders has helped

them to gain more agency over their work and to find better alignment with those donors. Notably, direct communication and interaction between WLOs and donors is not solely the purview of the direct funding model, but it does guarantee access, while in other funding models it is left to the discretion of donors themselves and/or intermediaries. Direct funding also gives donors more oversight over grant-making processes and projects; may help to reduce spending on intermediaries, depending on administrative models; and allows for more detailed in-house records of grantees and project focus (Mazzilli et al., 2025).

East SOS, a WLO operating in Ukraine that has received funding directly from the Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency (Sida) and others, points to three key advantages:

- a direct reporting line and interaction with the donor means less administrative pressure;
- easier budgeting for vital indirect costs, such as vehicles and personal protective equipment;
- longer-term certainty and flexibility, making the process more empowering overall.

East SOS attributes its success in achieving direct funding to its track record of successful delivery on previous, smaller grants from other sources; presence in coordination groups; and presentations made at key humanitarian convenings, arguing that more WLOs should be given the opportunity to engage in direct dialogue with funders.

The partnership with East SOS, funded directly from Sida's head office in Stockholm, is just one of Sida's direct funding efforts. Pilot projects are also underway in Myanmar, Bangladesh and the Democratic Republic of the Congo via different approaches, including co-funding, discussed below. Crucially, these projects are all small-scale, which has allowed Sida to gradually evaluate risks and assess the need for further funding or project adjustments (Mazzilli et al., 2025).

At the same time, direct funding is not always viable. Providing multiple direct funding grants can strain both donors' and small WLOs' administrative capacities. In addition, relying solely on direct funding could leave donors more isolated and uncoordinated, with each supporting their own projects independently at the risk of duplication. Finally, while some restrictions to direct funding can be overcome through political will or the adoption of a new high-level objectives by governments, others are much more stringent and cannot be bypassed, like legal restrictions against funding unregistered organisations, or aspects of budgets or mandates that are set by legislative processes. In such cases, modalities such as co-funding or indirect models might be more suitable.

2.1.1 Co-financing

Donors can collaborate to provide funding jointly through co-financing arrangements. These are helpful for simplifying donor bureaucracy, as funders with more stringent procedures can rely on those with more flexibility. This approach also decreases the reporting and communication burden on WLOs as funding recipients only need to report to the lead donor.

As noted above, Sida is also running a direct funding pilot with **WLOs in Myanmar**.[1] Sida is restricted in terms of the legal status of the entities it can fund, drastically reducing the pool of actors that can receive its humanitarian funding in the country, where many local organisations are unregistered due to restrictive state requirements. A solution was found in a co-financing arrangement with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), which has experience in funding local organisations using the 'direct action' approach outlined in its operational concept (SDC, 2022). Amongst other things, this model allows for greater flexibility with regard to the legal status of SDC's grantees, so Sida and SDC were able to combine their resources and provide them directly to WLOs there.

2.1.2 Consortia

Consortium-based funding models are those where a group of grantees comes together to receive funds from a donor, usually via a lead organisation from the group which also takes responsibility for meeting administrative requirements. While this approach is not yet commonplace in the humanitarian sector, it offers clear benefits for both WLOs and funders. Some consortia include a mix of WLOs, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and other actors, while others primarily comprise WLOs or similar grassroots and local organisations, sometimes with an INGO included (potentially on a temporary basis) for the purpose of providing administrative or financial systems support. By funding multiple smaller or grassroots actors together, or even in concert with some larger organisations, donors can fund WLOs directly while overcoming concerns about managing numerous smaller grants. Investing in a consortium of WLOs also helps donors to spread and therefore reduce perceived risks, which can help debunk notions that WLOs are particularly 'risky' grantees, and foster trust between donors and WLOs.

The collective structure of consortia can allow WLOs, even small ones, to access funding while sharing expertise with peers, building their capacities where needed and participating in governance and decision-making within the group. By working together in a consortium, smaller WLOs report being able to amplify their voice and influence in the sector. Similarly, participants in our research highlighted collective responsibility and decision-making as key to a successful consortium, discouraging internal competition and reinforcing the convergence of efforts towards a common goal.

The **Uganda National Platform** is a consortium established by the Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN) and funded by the Irene M. Staehelin (IMS) Foundation. It is led by Community Empowerment for Peace and Development (CEPAD) and includes WLOs from across Uganda, with considerable provision for self-led capacity development and autonomy in allocation of funds to specific WLOs' projects. Although the funds reach the consortium via ActionAid International, which provides ongoing financial systems support to FHN, this role is intentionally minimal and plays no part in designing or delivering the substance of the consortium's work.

1 These Myanmar-based WLOs cannot be named for safety reasons.

The platform notes some key drivers and conditions that enabled this model: first, allies inside the IMS Foundation advocated internally for flexible, trust-based approaches. Second, when the foundation sat down with WLOs on the back of that advocacy, they created a safe space for WLOs to speak candidly about how previous funding models had excluded them from agenda-setting and meaningful participation. As a result, IMS Foundation was open to co-design of due diligence, sub-granting and accountability mechanisms with consortium members. This ensured that WLOs' realities shaped the systems established and that dialogue would allow for re-design of any mechanism that did not work well. (See below for a summary of key actions.)

Key actions for direct funding

What can donors do to increase the accessibility of direct funding?

- Ask critical questions internally, such as:
  - What unique benefits might we be missing out on by not funding WLOs directly?
  - What is stopping us from funding WLOs directly?
  - How have other donors overcome such obstacles? (i.e. through small pilots, co-financing, consortia, etc.).
- Start small – for example, by funding consortia or co-financing with more flexible or experienced donors – and then take stock before scaling up.
- Advocate to bring WLOs into more coordination spaces and networks, including sectoral working groups, cluster coordination and Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs).

2.2 Indirect funding via intermediaries

Currently the modality that is most frequently employed in the humanitarian sector, indirect funding refers to cases where donors allocate funding to an intermediary – most commonly, an INGO or United Nations (UN) agency – which in turn distributes or sub-grants it to smaller local organisations, including WLOs, and manages the funding-related bureaucracy such as reporting to donors.

Many intermediaries are well-established organisations with their own expertise and capacity, making them advantageous partners for both funders and WLOs. They often bring their own in-house technical and thematic expertise, which can be beneficial. However, it can also mean that intermediaries absorb significant funds themselves, and this – combined with the slow process of establishing new implementing partner agreements – means that significant proportions of funds tend to remain with UN entities or INGOs rather than reaching WLO partners downstream.

As both WLOs and INGOs participating in our research noted, this rate retention generates a discrepancy between donors' public commitments and actions on the ground, with limited

transparency on how much reaches frontline actors. Intermediaries also frequently impose their own priorities and focus areas, in addition to those of donors, and may also downplay the contributions of WLOs in favour of their own visibility and recognition, as reported by participants (see also Anderson and Myrttinen, 2017; Sturridge et al., 2023). These problematic practices leave WLOs with less room for manoeuvre in designing their own interventions or identifying needs in their communities.

Conversely, many WLOs participating in our research highlighted that intermediaries can be transformative when they are intentional about pursuing egalitarian principles and actions. Participants called for intermediaries to set up funding calls specifically for WLOs, and to use their knowledge and leverage with funders to ensure that the conditions of that funding are equitable, not only in terms of decision-making and agenda setting, but cost-sharing too. Intermediaries can also use their standing with donors to advocate for multi-year, predictable funding.

As a promising example, participants in our research pointed to **Resourcing Change**, a multi-partner project funded by the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, which sits with the United Kingdom (UK) Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). This project saw INGOs Women for Women International, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and Saferworld act as intermediaries to channel unrestricted funding to WLOs in Afghanistan, Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen. WLO partners were given flexibility to pursue their own priorities, which was found to have a 'direct link to increasing community trust, sustainability and WROs' ability to do more sensitive work with conflict-affected communities' (Women for Women International et al., 2022: 8).

Similarly, **Women for Change (WfC)**, a WLO operating in South Sudan, reported a positive experience when partnering with the **Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD)** and **Trócaire**. The project pursued a new model that ringfenced resources for WfC to map its own capacities and fill any gaps through trainings or procurement. This allowed WfC to be honest about its own limitations and address them in ways that advanced the organisation's own development, beyond the remit of the partnership with CAFOD and Trócaire, and rather than simply ticking funders' boxes.

While the funding for these initiatives did not necessarily come from a humanitarian budget, they nonetheless offer learning about realistic practices for better quality funding and partnerships between intermediaries and WLOs operating in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Another example is CARE's support to women's empowerment collectives, facilitating the implementation of mutual aid (Ipsos Uganda and CARE Uganda, 2022).

As noted above, even where funding modalities are indirect, WLOs report that direct access to donors enabled better alignment and agency over their own work. It is thus crucial to build channels for direct communication between WLOs and funders into indirect models – which should be a joint responsibility of both donors and intermediaries. This kind of direct contact has also been shown to bring about better ways of working together: the South Sudan GBV Business Case funded by FCDO

includes principles for equitable partnerships with WLOs, developed based on direct consultation between FCDO and South Sudanese WLOs, which will be tested over the course of future partnerships. (See below for a summary of key actions.)

Key actions for indirect funding

What can donors do to increase accessibility of indirect funding?

- Ensure that intermediaries commit to and monitor the application of principles of equitable partnership and equitable risk-sharing to reduce exploitative relations with WLOs.
- Embed a direct communication channel between donors and WLOs in indirect funding modalities as part of both design and monitoring.

What can intermediaries do to increase accessibility of indirect funding?

- Commit to principles of equitable partnership and work to eradicate hierarchical and extractive practices with WLOs, including through co-designing funding calls.
- Make sub-granting to WLOs as flexible as possible in terms of timeframes and reporting requirements, including through advocating with donors and allocating as much funding as possible to WLOs.
- Facilitate direct contact between WLOs and donors.
- Transform capacity-building approaches to be co-designed and WLO-led, and allocate appropriate resourcing for this.

2.3 Pooled funds

Pooled funds are multi-donor financial instruments that allow donors to direct their contributions to a single, non-earmarked fund, managed by a central body and aimed at supporting humanitarian action with flexible and rapid resourcing (ICVA, 2025). Pooled funds are becoming more established in the humanitarian sector because they present clear advantages: first, they allow donors that would not have the capacity to fund on their own to contribute to a bigger funding venture. Second, they give the possibility to major donors like governments to move larger amounts of money quickly. Overall, pooled funds have a positive reputation of allowing for rapid action while maintaining an ample resource base, and they offer the potential to coordinate and strategise across a range of funders, implementing agencies and projects.

Pooled funds are in some ways similar to co-financing – both see multiple donors collaborating to fund humanitarian action – but the latter modality channels funding into a single project or initiative (see sub-section 2.1.1), while the former supports an ongoing fund managed by a coordination mechanism

(i.e. a steering board) and providing onward funding to a broad portfolio of projects. There are a wide range of pooled funds that target a diversity of themes, geographies and potential grantees, and that are managed in a variety of ways. For our purposes, we divide them into two main groups: humanitarian pooled funds and feminist funds.

2.3.1 Humanitarian pooled funds

Some humanitarian pooled funds are independently managed by INGOs and donors – for example, the Aid Fund for Syria is overseen by an independent steering board. Others, such as country-based pooled funds (CBPFs), are managed by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), with leadership by in-country humanitarian coordinators and geared towards specific priorities set out in humanitarian response plans.

A common misconception is that pooled funds are necessarily egalitarian in nature and equipped to reach small, grassroots or frontline organisations like WLOs. In reality, pooled funds can support inclusion and participation, although to ensure this outcome egalitarian processes must be built into them rather than assumed. In other words, pooled funds can succeed in funding small, local WLOs in a way that chimes with WLOs' own needs and vision only when there is a deliberate effort to facilitate this way of working. One way of incorporating this approach is to establish specific funding commitments and measurable targets for funding disbursement, project implementation, and decision-making. If these or similar rules are not clearly stated and binding, funding distribution might end up being skewed towards bigger established organisations, not unlike other humanitarian funding models. Some promising principles for this kind of action by pooled funds can be found in a guidance note produced by the UK, Swiss and Danish governments (FCDO et al., 2024).

A promising example of positive change comes from the **Ukraine Humanitarian Fund (UHF)**, an OCHA-led pooled fund established in 2019. The UHF has made significant efforts to be more accessible to local actors, including WLOs and other local actors representing marginalised groups. The team – with an IASC Gender Standby Capacity Project (GenCap) advisor and the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group – improved accessibility by training over 50 WLOs on eligibility systems, identifying and encouraging over 100 others to apply for funding, and updating the UHF's scorecard to assess gender and age dimensions of submissions separately, which made the process more inclusive of the many WLOs with specialisms in gender (Ukraine Humanitarian Fund, 2022). In 2022, the UHF granted $9.6 million overall for GBV prevention, rising to $18.6 million in 2024 (UN OCHA, 2024). Support for WLOs also grew, with $9 million awarded, nearly 5% of total allocations (Ukraine Humanitarian Fund, 2023).

This example shows what is possible within a mainstream pooled fund, but it is important to note the intensity of efforts required to achieve it. Given the changing nature of humanitarian coordination models amidst the humanitarian reset, and questions about the place of gender work within them, this type of close engagement from specialist advisers and coordination groups is at risk.

2.3.2 Feminist funds

'Feminist funds' is an umbrella term covering a diverse range of entities set up to channel funding to WLOs, WROs and feminist movements around the world. These include the Urgent Action Funds, Equality Fund, Global Fund for Women, Women's Fund Asia, African Women's Development Funds and many other national, regional and international funding bodies. We also include the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) here, as a fund designed specifically to reach WLOs and related organisations or movements, although this fund represents a collaboration between civil society and the humanitarian sector that is hosted by UN Women.

Like many of the WLOs they fund, feminist funds arise from women's rights and feminist movements, meaning that they are constituency-led, focused on understanding and shifting unequal power relations, and work intersectionally with an eye to interconnected struggles (Shake the Table and The Bridgespan Group, 2022). Their work is broadly guided by principles of solidarity, egalitarianism and support for women's leadership. Thus, many seek to absorb at least some of the upstream reporting requirements imposed by the donors that fund them, so that WLO grantees can devote their energies to emergency response. Feminist funds report that they take on some financial responsibilities such as covering for missing receipts or similar, which constitutes a helpful buffer between donors and receiving organisations. Others report engaging in advance due diligence processes so that they can act rapidly in the fact of acute crises.

Importantly, feminist funds have been central to developing and advocating for models of participatory grant-making. As Equality Fund states in a report detailing this approach, 'a collective approach to deciding funding priorities resulted in a diversity of funds receiving resources, including those that face particular challenges in accessing funding' – for example, women and girls, people with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual plus (LGBTQIA+) groups and refugees (Equality Fund, 2022: 19).

This, combined with their deep roots in communities, means that feminist funds also have impressive reach: participants in our research highlighted these funds' strong connections to the galaxy of small local organisations operating in their contexts, often based on their long-standing presence in communities before the onset of crisis and commitment to understanding the everyday realities of their grantees. Feminist funds can rely on this network to gather trustworthy information on new or unregistered organisations that are applying for funding, addressing donors' risk aversion. As a result, a recent UN discussion paper notes that many women's funds may be better equipped than UN agencies to

> reach certain groups (such as unregistered or deeply marginalized groups), manage certain types of funding (such as small or microgrants) or provide constituency-specific grantee support (e.g. to LGBTQI+ women, ethnic and racial minorities). (Inter-agency Task Force for Advancing a United Nations-wide Funding Framework for Women's Organizations and Civil Society Organizations, 2025: 20)

Channelling resources via feminist funds therefore offers real potential for ensuring that financial support reaches targeted groups of crisis-affected people and achieves outcomes for them. Thus, using exactly this kind of approach built on participatory grant-making, flexibility and trust, the Equality Fund has moved over CAD $100 million to WROs and regional and national women's funds in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan, Syria and Ukraine since its inception in 2019.

Building on this experience, in 2024, 12 feminist funds came together to design and launch the **First Response Fund (FRF)**, a global humanitarian pooled fund for WLOs and WROs, which used the funds' own anticipatory due diligence and networks to disburse financial aid rapidly. The FRF is governed by a steering group made up of WLOs, funders and humanitarian sector representatives. Rather than building an additional infrastructure, the Equality Fund was selected to act as the FRF's secretariat. (See below for a summary of key actions.)

Key actions for pooled funding and grant-making

What can donors do to increase the accessibility of pooled funding?

- Scale up funding to pooled mechanisms, with particular emphasis on those – like individual feminist funds, the WPHF and the FRF – that are set up specifically to channel funding to WLOs.
- Be deliberate in pooled funds' design and governance about funding small local organisations, and WLOs specifically, according to equality, inclusion and accessibility principles and commitments to local leadership.
- Advocate to include multiple WLOs in pooled funds' management boards.

What can pooled funds do to increase the accessibility and inclusiveness of their grant-making?

- Include multiple WLOs in pooled fund management boards.
- Work with WLOs to design funding calls, application processes and governance procedures to be inclusive of WLOs and cognisant of the challenges, needs and opportunities they face in humanitarian response.
- Continuously monitor the delivery of WLO programmes for affected communities, and use the results to inform future funding and capacity-building support.

3 Making transformative change

These emerging success stories demonstrate what is possible when funders take an adaptive, responsive approach to funding WLOs – one that recognises both the diversity of their roles and what they need to do their work effectively. However, even these promising examples are just the first steps: much more remains to be done if we are to connect these examples of good practice and bring about transformative change. This effort goes beyond any one funding modality and towards building a more coordinated, resilient and efficient funding ecosystem.

What might this kind of transformation look like in practice?

3.1 Working together for a complementary, funding ecosystem that allows WLOs to evolve

The diversity of funding modalities, each with strengths and weaknesses, reflects the unique capabilities and roles of different funders and creates a patchwork of potential complementarities. To make the most of these, we must move towards a more balanced funding ecosystem, where each node in the system can play its role with the proportionate funds to do so.

WLOs are an equally diverse group, varying in size, geographical scope, sectoral focus and the extent of their engagement with the international funding ecosystem (Mazzilli et al., 2025). As a representative from CEPAD emphasised in our recent workshop, no single framework can govern engagement with WLOs, as needs will vary between contexts. What emerges from these considerations is the potential for WLOs to connect with different funders at different stages of their development, moving between funds when (and if) their requirements or funding ambitions change.

Participants in our research indicated that this kind of progression is already happening, but in an ad hoc and uncoordinated way. The next step is to do it thoughtfully, resisting a one-size-fits-all or linear model of progression, and connecting WLOs with the opportunities best suited to their needs and priorities. This could be achieved by donors and WLOs co-creating strategies for follow-on funding, with funders leveraging their relative expertise and connections within the international funding system to help WLOs transition between funds. Alongside this, providing multi-year, institutional funding for WLOs creates the stability that is needed for them to implement long-term, transformative objectives for their organisations and for crisis-affected communities.

Some actors are already showing how this can be done: WPHF provides resources and demand-driven training to WLOs to set them up for future funding through both its Global Learning Hub and a 5% allocation for country funds to run similar programmes. Alongside this, WPHF provides WLOs with a map of entities providing funding and learning grants that allow pairs of organisations to exchange experiences and learning. Through these efforts, WPHF-supported WLOs have mobilised approximately $17 million from other funders in 2024 (Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, 2025: 4). This

demonstrates what can be achieved by taking a holistic systems approach and connecting WLOs with new opportunities driven by their own priorities. These catalytic efforts can be replicated by other funders across the ecosystem.

There are two important conditions to this approach. First, the considerable funding gap must be addressed. Modalities like feminist funds still represent a relatively small part of the ecosystem (Mazzilli et al., 2025). If these funds are to act as effective stepping stones, donors with the requisite capital must direct sufficient funds to scale these mechanisms. Otherwise, the system risks retaining too few entry points for local and national actors, including WLOs, to access funding. The type of funding is also key. Flexible, multi-year and core funding is essential for these mechanisms to effectively play their role.

Second, funders need to recognise and address the risk that working with WLOs to access new funding modalities means potentially pushing WLOs to conform to traditional humanitarian priorities and structures. Through this process of what has been termed NGO-isation (Al-Karib, 2018), civil society organisations can become increasingly depoliticised as they are made to conform to donor requirements – especially the principle of neutrality (Moallin et al., 2025). To act as genuine partners to WLOs, funders must actively respect both their long-term funding goals and transformative agendas. Given that many WLOs, if not most of them, work holistically and across the nexus, this is why predictable, flexible and longer-term funding for them is critical. Another essential step is creating space to learn from and connect with WLOs, to better understand their priorities and ways of working.

Key takeaways for an ecosystems approach

- Government donors must take active steps to diversify the funding modalities through which they channel money, recognising both the unique advantages and disadvantages of each and the full breadth of available options.
- All funders need to recognise the transformative impact their funding can have on the long-term development of WLOs, actively connecting them with and setting them up for other funding opportunities. Multi-year, institutional funding for WLOs is a key enabler for this.
- All funders should reflect on the unique value-add they can provide in supporting WLOs; they should play to their strengths and actively coordinate with other funders to leverage complementarities.
- All funders must consider the risks facing WLOs in the way they design their funding modalities and the costs they agree to cover, keeping in mind indirect and overhead costs, security costs and long-term organisational development.

3.2 Meaningful inclusion of WLOs in decision-making spaces

A more accessible funding ecosystem is also about the openness (or lack thereof) of humanitarian spaces, mechanisms and groups. At our recent roundtable, a representative from the Titi Foundation

highlighted a catch-22 situation wherein WLOs need funding to improve their visibility with funders but cannot access opportunities without this prior visibility. This point was reiterated by other participants reflecting on how opacity of funding circles – particularly within the philanthropic sector – creates a 'talent spotting' model where WLOs that are already able to access those spaces are sought out by funders, rather than opportunities being identified independent of those spaces. This model perpetuates an unfair – and ineffective – power imbalance between WLOs and funders.

Relatedly, often WLOs do not have access to the spaces where priorities are set and strategic decisions are made. Their proximity to their communities puts them in a unique position to help funders direct funds towards the most impactful interventions and design processes that include crisis-affected communities and frontline actors, but this potential is not being realised in practice. Instead, tokenistic efforts at representation mean that only those WLOs with existing access to the traditional humanitarian system are given a platform.

A clear starting point to shift these dynamics is fostering spaces for WLOs and funders to speak to one another directly. There is no single framework to determine what this might look like in practice for diverse funders and WLOs. Government donors, for example, can engage WLOs in the co-design of specific programmes that fit their scope of work. INGOs can consult WLOs on their localisation and procurement strategies, ensuring that their approach centres access and opportunities for equal partnership. UN agencies can take steps to ensure WLO inclusion in coordination spaces and policy forums, including those centred around flagship reform initiatives like the humanitarian reset and the Grand Bargain.

Too often, these processes are managed through surface-level consultations that fail to foster meaningful participation in decision-making. Inclusion will remain tokenistic unless structured, robust accountability mechanisms are put in place to ensure that WLOs are not only listened to but actively brought in as equal partners in decision-making. Additionally, material barriers to access such as visa inequality, travel costs and support for caring responsibilities need to be collaboratively addressed.

A wide range of existing networks, platforms and mechanisms already exist that can help funders engage with the WLO community. For instance, organisations like FHN have wide reach, comprising 90 members, of which 81% are Global South-based WROs (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2025: 2). Other opportunities that can be taken up or enhanced include the dozen National Reference Groups; regular forums like the Commission on the Status of Women, the Association for Women's Rights in Development, and Women Deliver; and the activities and networks of feminist funds like the Equality Fund, WPHF, the African Women's Development Fund, and the four Urgent Action Funds. All of these networks and spaces can be mechanisms for generating more connections between donors and WLOs, and thus for donors to expand their networks and bring more WLOs into their own sectoral spaces, groups, networks and mechanisms.

Progress is already being made in furthering this kind of inclusion and creating spaces for funders to engage with WLOs. OCHA, through the country and regional funds, has made efforts to include

WLOs in 18 of 21 advisory boards (UN OCHA, 2025: 42, 36), and WLO representation in HCTs has also increased – although representatives at our roundtable were clear that more can be done to further embed WLOs in HCTs at the heart of humanitarian coordination in UN country systems.

These efforts have been facilitated by internal and external advocacy to create benchmarks and accountability mechanisms. Within OCHA, for example, a focused gender policy (OCHA Policy Instruction on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls) with three priority areas, including promoting the leadership and participation of women and girls and women's organisations, reinforced by a Gender Action Plan with indicators, has enabled some of the progress. Having clear indicators to include women's organisations on pooled fund advisory boards and in decision-making forums, including the HCTs, has facilitated some of these concrete changes.

Supporting women's participation and leadership in decision-making reflects the role WLOs can play beyond service delivery, bridging gaps between affected populations and decision-making forums at the international and national levels. Scaling these efforts requires shifts in organisational culture towards actively spotting opportunities to bring WLOs into decision-making spaces and proactively building networks to do so equitably. Making progress on these efforts has the potential to foster a humanitarian system that is more responsive and accountable to the people it aims to serve.

Key takeaways for meaningful inclusion

- All funders must actively create opportunities for WLOs to participate in decision-making spaces, ensuring that this engagement is governed by structured, robust accountability mechanisms.
- All funders should identify the unique leverage that they have within the different layers of the humanitarian system and use it to create entry points for WLOs both to access funding and to influence the design of humanitarian action.
- All funders should engage existing networks of WLOs, using them as a basis to broaden their engagement within the WLO community.

3.3 Experimentation, innovation and learning by doing

Although they often seem insurmountable, many of the factors that constrain funders' flexibility are not set in stone – they are the result of their own policies, operational procedures or working practices – and can be changed, especially where there is willingness to reflect and innovate. As a representative from CEPAD West Nile noted in our roundtable, institutions need to look at their internal policies and bureaucracies to assess where greater flexibility is possible. While some sticking points are harder to change than others, such as legal requirements, progress can and should be made to shift practices

within each funder group to pilot new models or ways of working. Innovation is key to increasing accessibility, centring accountability and reassessing risk, in order to achieve the transformative systems change that WLOs continue to advocate for (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2025).

We know that more flexible approaches are possible. Due diligence passporting has been proposed as a way to avoid duplication, while flexible reporting frameworks such as the IASC's Harmonized Reporting (or 8+3) Template can be introduced. Where the standard 'capacity-building' framework has been criticised as paternalist, models trialled by CAFOD and Trócaire promise a more collaborative capacity assessment and development process. And, finally, as our recent study and roundtable highlighted, direct funding to WLOs is possible for government donors in certain contexts (Mazzilli et al., 2025).

These approaches only scratch the surface of innovations being developed across the ecosystem to direct more funding to local actors, including WLOs (Posada Bermudez, 2025). Although these mechanisms are increasingly proving effective and are attractive in principle, funders face thorny issues and inertia in introducing them internally due to embedded ways of working, administrative constraints and cultural assumptions around what does and does not work. By starting with smaller-scale pilots, working through uncertainties and any emerging risks or obstacles, and iterating as they learn what works, funders can develop the evidence base and confidence to scale approaches that suit both their internal constraints and the needs of WLOs.

Key takeaways for innovative approaches

- Government donors and philanthropies should incentivise intermediaries – like INGOs and UN agencies – to test innovative approaches, creating dedicated budget lines for them to do so.
- Government donors and philanthropies should engage with and support the innovative funding modalities outlined in this paper, building a balanced picture of their effectiveness.
- All funders should trial and test innovative approaches to due diligence, reporting and capacity assessment, working out what fits best with their internal processes and policies.

4 Paradigm shifts for an ecosystem model

Creating a more accessible and effective funding ecosystem for WLOs in humanitarian response is not merely a technical question – it also speaks to the values that underpin donorship and the role of intermediaries. Outmoded ways of thinking and working are blockers to better support for WLOs, but they are also impediments to more effective, straightforward and impactful grant-making for funders.

The following are paradigm shifts with the potential to benefit donors as they look to the future.

Openness to innovation and new ways of working

Risk aversion and inertia are powerful barriers to change, particularly amidst challenges to humanitarian legitimacy. But, in the context of the reset and a new funding landscape, humanitarians must be open to testing new modalities and breaking out of old patterns.

Local impact over donor priorities

Top-down definitions of impact do not amount to meaningful impact. Allowing WLOs to tell their own stories about their work and its impact through flexible reporting and direct contact with donors is key to ensuring responses are contextualised, appropriate and tangible.

Flipping the script on risk

Where perceptions of risk have been a major barrier to date, funders must take seriously the risks of not funding, including risks to WLOs' staff due to their visibility as women leaders. Forthcoming research by FHN demonstrates that donors, intermediaries and WLOs conceptualise risk in fundamentally different ways, and it is perceived risks to donors – of financial and reputational harms, for example – that take precedence, leaving local actors and communities to absorb all other threats. Funders of all kinds must urgently rethink their risk frameworks and question their own assumptions about which risks matter – and why.

Recentring affected people – and trusting actors that are already reaching them

Start from a position of asking: 'Why *not* trust WLOs?'. Capacity assessments and due diligence should be collaborative and formative processes, not a hard stop on partnerships. Any analysis of WLOs' trustworthiness, accountability or effectiveness must also sit alongside criticisms of the international humanitarian system, which fails to use allocated resources effectively or fully meet needs (Moallin, 2024). By contrast, local organisations could deliver programming as much as 32% more efficiently than international agencies (Share Trust and Warande Advisory Centre, 2022). Can funders really continue to place their perceptions of WLOs above the ongoing needs of affected people?

Valuing process over outputs

When funders invest in better processes, not just outputs, then WLOs are treated as equal partners in designing interventions and meaningful representation becomes a natural result of shared ownership, not an add-on. Structural change becomes achievable. Outcomes for crisis-affected people improve.

Courage

WLOs and their allies have made the case for better ways of working, and they are ready to help funders do the same – within their own agencies and ministries, with allies in the international humanitarian sector, with taxpayers and voters. Contrary to what many elected representatives believe, and despite noisy populist rhetoric, people want to hear arguments for assistance that relate to 'doing our bit' and fighting injustice and inequality (Anders, 2024). Funders can shift the narrative toward new ways of working.

References

Al-Karib, H. (2018) 'The dangers of NGO-isation of women's rights in Africa'. Al Jazeera, 13 December (www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/12/13/the-dangers-of-ngo-isation-of-womens-rights-in-africa).

Anders, M. (2024) 'Does the new UK government know how to talk about global issues?' Development Engagement Lab (https://developmentengagementlab.org/does-the-new-uk-government-know-how-to-talk-about-global-issues/).

Anderson, K. and Myrttinen, H. (2017) *Now is the time: research on gender justice, conflict and fragility in the Middle East and North Africa.* Oxford: Oxfam (https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/now-is-the-time-research-on-gender-justice-conflict-and-fragility-in-the-middle-620274/).

Daigle, M., Spencer, A., Diab, J.L., et al. (2023) *Sex, health and rights in displacement and humanitarian response: crises upon crises in Lebanon and beyond.* London: ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/publications/sex-health-and-rights-in-displacement-and-humanitarian-response-crises-upon-crises-in-lebanon-and-beyond/).

Equality Fund (2022) *Step up, step back: reimagining non-competitive grantmaking in community.* Ontario: Equality Fund (https://equalityfund.ca/grantmaking/step-up-step-back-reimagining-non-competitive-grantmaking-in-community/).

FCDO, SDC and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (2024) 'Guidance note for donors: Promoting inclusive and locally-led action through humanitarian pooled funds'. (https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-official-website/guidance-note-donors-promoting-inclusive-and-locally-led-action-through-humanitarian-pooled-funds).

Feminist Humanitarian Network (2021) *Women's humanitarian voices: Covid-19 through a feminist lens.* Feminist Humanitarian Network (www.feministhumanitariannetwork.org/covid-report).

Feminist Humanitarian Network (2025) *Feminist humanitarian action: still holding the line.* Feminist Humanitarian Network (www.feministhumanitariannetwork.org/news/feministhumanitarianaction-still-holding-the-line).

Fletcher, T. (2025) 'Statement by Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher - The Humanitarian Reset Phase Two'. IASC, 19 June (https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/inter-agency-standing-committee/statement-emergency-relief-coordinator-tom-fletcher-humanitarian-reset-phase-two-0).

Guimond, M.-F. and Robinette, K. (2014) 'A survivor behind every number: using programme data on violence against women and girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo to influence policy and practice' *Gender & Development* 22(2): 311–326 (https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2014.920979).

IASC – Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2024) *Guidance engagement, participation and decision-making by women-led organizations in humanitarian action.* Geneva: IASC (https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-reference-group-gender-and-humanitarian-action/iasc-guidance-engagement-participation-and-decision-making-women-led-organizations-humanitarian).

ICVA (2025) *Humanitarian financing landscape: 'grab and go' pocket guide*. Geneva: ICVA (www.icvanetwork.org/resource/pocket-guides-on-humanitarian-finance/).

Inter-agency Task Force for Advancing a United Nations-wide Funding Framework for Women's Organizations and Civil Society Organizations (2025) *Preliminary analysis of United Nations system approaches to resourcing women's organizations and civil society organizations*. New York: UN Trust Fund (https://untf.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/02/preliminary-analysis-of-united-nations-system-approaches-to-resourcing-womens-organizations-and-civil-society-organizations).

Ipsos Uganda and CARE Uganda (2022) *Women's groups and women empowerment collectives: a baseline landscaping study of women's groups and women empowerment collectives in Uganda*. Kampala: CARE Uganda (www.careuganda.org/Publications/womens-groups-and-women-empowerment-collectives/).

Maung, M., Mazzilli, C. and Daigle, M. (2025) *How women lead: women-led organisations as humanitarian crisis responders*. HPG working paper. London: ODI Global (www.odi.org/en/publications/how-women-lead-women-led-organisations-as-humanitarian-crisis-responders).

Mazzilli, C., Maung, M. and Daigle, M. (2025) *Breaking down the barriers to women-led responses amidst the humanitarian reset: stepping up, stepping back, making space*. HPG working paper. London: ODI Global (www.odi.org/en/publications/breaking-down-the-barriers-to-women-led-responses-amidst-the-humanitarian-reset).

Moallin, Z. (2024) 'Holding states to account: do humanitarians undermine civil society?' ODI Global insight, 10 October (https://odi.org/en/insights/holding-states-account-humanitarians-undermine-civil-society/).

Moallin, Z., Fouad, L. and Barter, D. (2025) *A humanitarian trap? Navigating neutrality, relief and rights in Ethiopia, Myanmar, Syria and Guatemala*. HPG working paper. London: ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/publications/a-humanitarian-trap-navigating-neutrality-relief-and-rights-in-ethiopia-myanmar-syria-and-guatemala/).

Njeri, S. and Daigle, M. (2022) *Women leading local humanitarian response during the Covid-19 pandemic*. HPG working paper. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/women-leading-local-humanitarian-response-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/).

Posada Bermudez, A. (2025) *Explain: Localisation and locally-led action*. London: ALNAP (https://alnap.org/help-library/resources/explain-locally-led/).

SDC – Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (2022) *Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit operational concept 2030*. Bern: SDC (www.eda.admin.ch/content/dam/countries/countries-content/thailand/en/SHA_Operational_Concept_2030.pdf).

Shake the Table and The Bridgespan Group (2022) *Lighting the way: a report for philanthropy on the power and promise of feminist movements*. Boston, MA: The Bridgespan Group (www.bridgespan.org/insights/philanthropy-and-feminist-movements).

Share Trust and Warande Advisory Centre (2022) *Passing the buck: the economics of localizing assistance*. Share Trust (https://thesharetrust.org/resources/2022/11/14/passing-the-buck-the-economics-of-localizing-international-assistance).

Sturridge, C., Girling-Morris, F., Spencer, A., et al. (2023) *The failure to fund refugee-led organisations: why the current system is not working, and the potential for change*. HPG report. London: ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/publications/the-failure-to-fund-refugee-led-organisations-why-the-current-system-is-not-working-and-the-potential-for-change/).

Ukraine Humanitarian Fund (2022) *Ukraine Humanitarian Fund Annual Report 2022*. Geneva: OCHA (www.unocha.org/publications/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-fund-annual-report-2022).

Ukraine Humanitarian Fund (2023) *Ukraine Humanitarian Fund 2023 Annual Report*. Geneva: OCHA (www.unocha.org/publications/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-fund-annual-report-2023-enuk).

UN OCHA – Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2024) 'The OCHA pooled funds' response in Ukraine'. New York: UN OCHA (www.unocha.org/publications/report/ukraine/ocha-pooled-funds-response-ukraine-2024-update-0).

UN OCHA (2025) *Country-based pooled funds and regional humanitarian pooled funds 2024 in review*. New York: UN OCHA (www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/country-based-pooled-funds-and-regional-humanitarian-pooled-funds-2024-review).

Women for Women International, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and Saferworld (2022) 'Resourcing change: supporting women's rights organisations in fragile and conflict-affected states'. London: Saferworld (www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1406-resourcing-change-supporting-womenas-rights-organisations-in-fragile-and-conflict-affected-states).

Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (2025) *2024 annual report: financing women on the frontlines, advancing peace*. New York: Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (https://wphfund.org/annualreport2024/).

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) is one of the world's leading teams of independent researchers and communications professionals working on humanitarian issues. It is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate.

Humanitarian Policy Group
OD GlobalI
Four Millbank
London SW1P 3JA
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Email: hpgadmin@odi.org
Website: odi.org/hpg